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What's up with Webcomics?: Author-Reader Relationships and Finances

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What's up with Webcomics?: Author-Reader Relationships and Finances

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By Maria Walters

In my [previous article](#), I pointed out how the transition from print to screen is changing comics artistically and conceptually. [1] Now I want to look at the experiences of webcomic artists outside of the direct creation of their comics. With forums, e-mail, and commenting, authors have the opportunity to hear from their audiences like never before, and entire relationships and communities are built on webcomics. The challenges for online comic artists are most evident in the finances – because comics are not being sold to consumers, most webcomic artists have to be creative in making money from their art.

Webcomic Communities Online

With social networking sites springing up right and left, we can't help but notice how many communities are forming and thriving online. Social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook allow authors to keep their audience involved in their lives, as well as the progress of their work. Blogs and RSS feeds provide similar content from the webcomic's homepage itself. Some authors prefer to let their art speak for itself, but others add commentary via blogs or other updates. Interestingly, webcartoonists seem evenly divided between showing their blog posts or updates on the same page as their comics and having a separate blog.

Some authors even involve their audience in the comic writing process. Tim Buckley enjoys getting reader feedback intermittently in a create-your-own-adventure-style storyline, as readers vote on plot changes. The most recent of these storylines took place from November 2008 until January 2009. [2] Of course, giving readers the opportunity to comment on particular comics is not uncommon, though it is also not universally implemented. Some authors prefer to have discussions between readers take place on forums, which allows for greater continuity in discussions.

Another effect of these forums is the relationships formed between readers. Forums allow users

to introduce conversations that are not directly related to any particular comic, which is vital to the formation of a true community. They also allow a reader to be easily directed towards discussions most interesting to them, instead of being forced to wade through a stream of comments on each particular comic that may or may not dissolve into a more general conversation. Plus, forums provide authors with the opportunity to get to know their audiences, interact, and answer questions in a public place.

In Real Life

Readers also use webcomics and the fun-loving communities surrounding them to have fun in real life. Randall Monroe's *xkcd* featured the concept of "Geohashing", which inspired readers to get together in randomly assigned locations in a given geographic region every Saturday afternoon to meet other local *xkcd* fans. [3] After an *xkcd* comic about Richard Stallman being attacked by ninjas appeared, fun-loving readers decided to send Richard Stallman a katana and, a few months later, dress as ninjas and "attack" him. [4]

Readers of *Ctrl+Alt+Del* are familiar with the idea of Winter-eeen-mas, a holiday invented by one of the main characters of the comic, which has since taken on a life of its own. It is described as "a celebration of video games and the people that play them," and takes place every year between January 25th and 31st. [5]

And then there are conventions. Many webcomic artists attend general comic conventions, or even other gatherings focused on gaming or other niches. Webcomics themselves have historically lacked conventions. In 2005, ClickBurg, a Dutch convention specifically for webcomic artists and readers, proudly introduced "one of the youngest art forms in the world: webcomics!" [6] However, after 2005, webcomic conventions appeared to take a break until this year. 2009 saw the New England Webcomics Weekend, which took place in Massachusetts in March. [7] The convention was so popular that preregistration was required and attendance had to be capped at 700 people. Though ClickBurg was a one-time-only convention, the Webcomics Weekend hopes to continue in the future, and already has a promising start. Of course, we also need to mention a convention that was started by a popular webcomic: the Penny Arcade Exposition (PAX) was founded 10 years ago by Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins, the creators of Penny Arcade. [8] An annual game festival in Seattle, it is geared toward tabletop, videogame, and PC gamers and generally takes place in the fall. The creators describe it as "a big party we throw for the gaming community in general and PA [*Penny Arcade*] readers in particular." [9] It has become so popular that a corresponding east coast convention, PAX East, is in the works for spring 2010. [10] Though this convention has very little to do with webcomics themselves, the readership of Penny Arcade makes up a crucial part of these expos, and readers enjoy meeting each other in real life after getting to know each other on the Penny Arcade forums.

Methods of Financing

Though becoming increasingly popular, webcomics are still not an easy way to make a living. The attempt to make a profit from webcomics has resulted in a variety of creative financing

ideas.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, idea is to sell subscriptions. However, for one thing, “people expect the internet to be free,” as Jeph Jacques, author of *Questionable Content*, points out. [11] Having restricted access to content discourages new readers from taking a chance and subscribing to an unknown comic, especially when so many others are freely available. One response is for authors to allow readers to access current comics or a limited archive for free, but to require a subscription in order to read the entire archive. Also, artists such as James Kochalka and demian5 produce multiple webcomics, some of which are publically available and some of which require subscriptions. [12] Of course, all of these subscriptions are relatively inexpensive, with most costing only a couple of dollars per month.

A related but new idea involves selling future comics instead of past ones. *Hereville*, described as “Yet Another Troll-Fighting 11-Year-Old Orthodox Jewish Girl Comic” on its homepage and written by Barry Deutsch, was published last year in a unique way: pages of the graphic novel were published online serially, with a page or two being published each week, but the complete story was already finished. If readers wanted to read it faster than it was published online, they had a chance to purchase the book (in either printed or digital form) and read the entire story. [13] Now the novel is due to be published by Harry Abrams’s Amulet Books in a longer (physical) form in 2010 – a relatively unique experience for webcomics. [14]

Selling additional content (think “special features”) is not particularly revolutionary, but new types of additional content are always being added. The webcomic *Goblins* can be purchased and downloaded as a PDF ebook “packed with never before seen extras, including a three page bonus comic, early sketches, behind the scenes material, and a running text commentary throughout the *Book Two* story.” [15] A similar model involves selling access to additional comic-related online content. I first ran across this idea in the model of the comic “Achewood,” [16] which describes its additional content for subscribers as:

- New author annotations on most pieces
- Approximately twenty double-sized, full-color “Achewood” comics
- Early blueprint of the 62 Achewood Court house
- The Lyle Drinking Games (Achewood trivia board games)
- The full-color, original map of the Achewood neighborhood, as conceived in 2002
- The Story of Achewood: a written overview of Teodor’s first day moving into the house
- Seven long subscriber-only blog-type entries by Ray
- The entire Nate Small novella, formatted in old Hardy Boys book style
- Eighteen scans from Chris’s sketchbooks, including the geneses of several seminal strips
- ...more! [17]

The premium updates also supply subscribers with daily text updates, photos, and rough drafts of future panels. [18] Clearly, both readers who are only able to access the comics and subscribers will have an equally satisfying time enjoying the characters and stories created by the author. Of

course, this model will not work for all comics, especially those that focus on stand-alone jokes instead of a character-driven narrative.

Though not unique, one tried-and-tested way to monetize websites, and, in this case, webcomics, is to allow advertising. Though this is sometimes looked down upon because of the lack of aesthetic appeal, webcomic artists and site designers can incorporate advertising gracefully. In 2009, the advertising market has dropped significantly, but Jeph Jacques, for one, still recognizes it as a significant part of his income. [19]

As webcomics were first gaining popularity, Scott McCloud saw the future of webcomic funding as being micropayments or donations. If every reader of a strip contributed a few cents or a dollar, a comic with an average readership would be more than self-sustaining. However, this has proved to be unrealistic, especially because security issues and phishing are still so common. Nevertheless, a “Tip Jar” or “Donation” link is frequently available, albeit subtle. In a similar way, *xkcd* offers prints at a variable price – to make a donation, a reader can order a print and then change its price to the amount they are willing to donate before making their purchase. [20]

Of course, digital content still only goes so far, and many, if not most, self-sustaining webcomics do so through sales of physical products. Often prints of individual pages can be purchased, and assembling archived material into books is also common. Beyond that, many artists design T-shirts or other memorabilia that would be interesting to their audiences. In *Questionable Content*, the characters themselves often wear shirts available for purchase – in fact, readers often request specific T-shirts that the characters are seen wearing before they are produced for sale. [21]

Though there are many different money-making methods available to webcomic artists, the artists themselves exhibit considerable solidarity in the face of critics. In February, Neil Swaab, a syndicated cartoonist whose work also appears online, criticized many current models of webcomic funding, especially merchandising. [22] Many webcartoonists responded quickly to his post, defending the current merchandise-based model. As Jeph Jacques wrote in his blog, “comics have ALWAYS derived significant portions of their income from merchandising. Saying webcartoonists are t-shirt hucksters is like saying Charles Schultz was an insurance salesman because Snoopy is on the Met Life blimp.” [23] A similar protest is voiced by Gary Tyrrell, editor of *Fleen: The Webcomics Blog About Webcomics*, who writes that webcomic artists who sell T-shirts are merchandising just like so-called artists, but simply aren’t using a middleman. [24]

Since then, Swaab has both apologized [25] and stated his intention to move toward webcomic-type marketing, in an interesting post which documents his career as an alternative comic artist and the changes that he has seen in the comics market. [26] Swaab already has a following online – in fact, his comic, “Mr. Wiggles Loves You,” was mentioned as worthy of review by a commenter on my previous article. [27]

Extra Special Bonus

In a category all its own, “Oh No Robot” is a comic search engine that has helped to organize and transcribe thousands of comics. [28] After webcartoonists register, readers help to transcribe comics (prompted by a “Transcribe this Comic!” link below each comic), and the transcriptions are then made searchable through OhNoRobot.com. Besides searching all transcriptions, you can also search the archive of one particular series or check out a random comic. It's a great way to find new comics, besides getting suggestions. Speaking of which: comment about more comics in the space below, and they could be reviewed in coming issues.

Endnotes

[1] <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2009/02/article.php?id=37>

[2] <http://www.ctrlaltdel-online.com/comic.php?d=20081126>

[3] Inspired by this comic: <http://xkcd.com/426/>, the adventure continues at the wiki: http://wiki.xkcd.com/geohashing/Main_Page

[4] The comic: <http://xkcd.com/225/>; sending Richard Stallman a katana: <http://blog.xkcd.com/2007/04/19/life-imitates-xkcd-part-ii-richard-stallman/>; ninjas “attack”: <http://www.boingboing.net/2007/10/21/ninjas-attack-richar.html>.

[5] <http://www.wintereenmas.com/>

[6] Official site (in Dutch): <http://www.clickburg.nl/welcome/index.php>; some information in English can be found at: http://comixtalk.com/preparations_underway_for_dutch_webcomic_convention

[7] <http://www.webcomicsweekend.com/> — for one of many reviews, see <http://splashpage.mtv.com/2009/03/23/webcomics-weekend-online-comics-get-their-own-convention-heres-what-you-missed/>

[8] Comic: <http://www.penny-arcade.com/>; Expo: <http://www.pennyarcadeexpo.com/>

[9] <http://www.pennyarcadeexpo.com/faqs.php>

[10] <http://www.paxsite.com/paxeast/index.php>

[11] <http://qcjeph.livejournal.com/100732.html>

[12] James Kochalka: <http://www.americanelf.com/>; demian5: <http://www.demian5.com/index-e.php>

[13] <http://www.hereville.com/>

[14] <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6611063.html>

[15] See Goblins online here: <http://www.goblinscomic.com/>; the ebook package is sold here: http://comics.drivethrustuff.com/product_info.php?products_id=51412&language=en

[16] <http://achewood.com/>

[17] http://achewood.com/archived_edition.php

[18] <http://s.assetbar.com/store/achewood>

[19] <http://qcjeph.livejournal.com/100732.html>

[20] <http://store.xkcd.com/>

[21] http://www.topatoco.com/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=TO&Product_Code=QC-TEH&Category_Code=QC

[22] Post has been removed: <http://www.mrwiggleslovesyou.com/blog-january2009.html#theend>

[23] <http://qcjeph.livejournal.com/100732.html>

[24] <http://www.fleen.com/archives/2009/02/01/emergency-post-to-vent-rage/>

[25] <http://www.mrwiggleslovesyou.com/blog-february2009.html#apology>

[26] <http://www.mrwiggleslovesyou.com/blog-february2009.html#500>

[27] <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2009/02/article.php?id=37#comments>

[28] <http://www.ohnorobot.com/>

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ONE THOUGHT ON "WHAT'S UP WITH WEBCOMICS?: AUTHOR-READER RELATIONSHIPS AND FINANCES"

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Cheers!